

Frankly Ernest

Can the 12th District's first term congressman save himself from his own worst enemy?

by Hal Plotkin and Dan Pulcrano

Late note: As Metro went to press, it was reported that 35-year-old Stanford Law Professor Thomas Campbell will challenge Konnyu in the GOP primary with McCloskey's backing.

Representative Ernest Konnyu fell to his knees on the tarmac at Crissy Field in San Francisco last month in order to kiss visiting Pope John Paul's papal ring. Recent developments within Konnyu's congressional district have given the former Assemblymember from Saratoga good reason to implore the Almighty.

Following some embarrassing reports of inappropriate comments made to several female staff members in a front page *Mercury News* story, Konnyu has become a target for Republicans who in the past either supported him or remained neutral. Democrats are even growing brave enough to suggest that the 12th Congressional District may even be conquered by a member of their party.

Konnyu faces an almost certainly bitter fight in next year's election including opposition—either in person or by proxy—from former Rep. Paul N. "Pete" McCloskey Jr. of Woodside. On September 2, McCloskey wrote in a letter to a reporter that he will give his "unqualified support" to "a Republican candidate... whom I believe to have the ability, dedication and financial backing to defeat a Republican incumbent in this district.

"If no such person comes forward within the reasonably-foreseeable future," McCloskey added, "I will consider giving up the enjoyable and rewarding practice of law in this treasured community to file for the Republican nomination next winter."

McCloskey's threat hasn't changed plans for Konnyu, who laughs aloud at the thought of stepping aside for McCloskey—or any other Republican—to run for his congressional seat. "I am committed to this job. I love being a congressman," he declares. "A Hungarian immigrant has gotten this far—I'm not going to back off just because somebody like Pete doesn't like what I'm doing."

The first-term congressman has responded to the McCloskey threat by going straight for McCloskey's Achilles' heel—his reputation as a foe of Israel and, as some have charged, an anti-Semite. Konnyu's blatant attempt to capitalize on Jewish antipathy for McCloskey, however, may backfire in light of a *Metro* investigation that indicates that Konnyu may have been overzealous in attributing anti-Semitic remarks to McCloskey.

In a recent fundraising pitch to some Jewish supporters, Konnyu alleged that his likely opponent in next year's 12th Congressional District Republican primary, one-time US Senate candidate McCloskey, had privately referred to *Peninsula Times Tribune* Political Editor Mark Simon as "that Jew."

McCloskey denies ever having made the remark and calls Konnyu's reported remark "the ravings of a madman."

Embattled Ernie: Crusader against pinkos, commies, free-spending liberals, Rose Bird and Arafat-loving Pete McCloskey

Asked whether McCloskey had made a slur against Mark Simon in any of his conversations with him, Konnyu at first said, "No, he did not."

Once again the question was asked. "Not that I know of," Konnyu answered.

When reminded that he had repeated the remark to a supporter, Konnyu said: "Mark Simon is the one that told me that some years ago—I think in '82 during the senatorial campaign of Pete McCloskey—that there was some such reference. But you'd better talk to Mark to get the specific quote."

Prominent local Jewish community leader and political donor Robert Pasternak, a Konnyu supporter, remembers the legislator telling him something different than that. According to Pasternak, Konnyu said that McCloskey had made the derogatory comment about Simon in a recent phone conversation between the two politicians.

"Konnyu told me—in no uncertain terms—that McCloskey had referred to Simon as 'that Jew,'" Pasternak says. "There are no ifs, ands or buts about it that he [Konnyu] made that remark."

Simon denies Konnyu's suggestion that he was the source of the information. He says that he believes there are enough things McCloskey has said and done to alienate Jewish constituents for Konnyu to use as fundraising foils without having to resort to the use of ethnic slurs.

"Somebody recently told me that Konnyu was telling people he [Konnyu] heard that remark directly from McCloskey in a telephone conversation," Simon says. When informed that McCloskey has denied the accusation in the strongest possible terms, Simon was relieved. "If it is untrue, I am delighted," he said, noting, "I have no animosity for Pete McCloskey."

That such an attributed statement would gain currency is in no small measure due to the reputation McCloskey has molded through his past statements vis-a-vis Israel and the Jewish community. While McCloskey insists that his criticisms are limited to critiques of Israeli policy, he has opened fire on the Jewish community with arguments that embody classic anti-Semitic themes: the Jews control the media and slant the news; the Jewish lobby is too powerful and dictates American foreign policy in the Middle East to the detriment of America's best interests; the loyalty of American Jews to this country is compromised by their sympathies for Israel.

McCloskey defends his stance by pointing out that some of his best friends and colleagues are Jewish.

But, with only minor modifications, McCloskey's statements, for some, are too closely reminiscent of the discredited notion of a too-powerful "international Jewish conspiracy." This observation was not missed by the racist crackpots who showered fan mail on the congressman when he began his anti-Israel crusade back in the early '80s. This led to the 1982 resignation of aide Josh Teitelbaum, who avoided criticizing his former employer publicly but privately expressed deep concerns about McCloskey's direction and the effects it was producing.

In Congress, McCloskey called for a cutoff of

American aid to Israel and encouraged direct American contacts with the Palestine Liberation Organization. He railed against what he calls the "Jewish lobby." He was quoted in the New Delhi newspaper *Indian Express* as saying: "Most of our newspaper and television media have one or more Jewish Americans in very high positions." He questioned whether Jewish reporters could objectively cover the Middle East because of their alleged biases.

He hasn't modified his positions, either. On KTEH's *Malone* television program last week McCloskey focused on American aid for Israel as a step towards reducing the budget deficit. In the accompanying interview, McCloskey reiterates his opposition to American foreign policy in the Middle East and says he has no regrets for his past statements.

Konnyu, who has admitted to polarizing voters as an electoral strategy and whose political career has taken ample advantage of name-calling (he calls his political adversaries "commies," "pinkos," "radicals" and "free-spending liberals") appears more than willing to exploit the anti-Semitism issue in hopes of getting re-elected.

About McCloskey he says: "Obviously he knows he's carrying a lot of baggage that would be disastrous in the Republican primary, all the way from his state co-chairmanship of Rose Bird and her reelection effort last year to his lasting support of Yassir Arafat and being, from what I understand, the attorney-of-record for the Arab-American League or some such thing.

"Those things would be very, very tough for him to overcome in the primary election. It appears to me that Pete really wants to run and he is assessing his chances, given that he has acted more like a Democrat than a Republican on the key issues... On eight different points he has been an embarrassment to the Republican party."

Konnyu estimates that a primary fight against McCloskey would cost \$750,000 to \$1 million. Where will he raise that kind of money? "Heck if I know," the congressman says, "but we're starting on it. A group of my friends in Congress are outraged at Pete's behavior and are organizing a group of Republican members who will be on my side.

"About the last person they want to welcome back to Congress from the 12th Congressional District is Pete McCloskey," he says.

Konnyu doesn't think that the Middle East should be the central theme in a congressional race, but he does point out, "He's on one side and I'm on the other.

"His support of Yasir Arafat and being, I think, on the un-American side of that issue—Israel and Arabs—obviously is going to hurt him and obviously is going to help me. But I don't see that as the key battle plan," Konnyu says.

Konnyu says he has a national following among Hungarian-Americans, and he also hopes to attract funds from the local Jewish community. "I have a number of Jewish friends who believe in me and strongly support me and have so in the past. I would expect that if Pete McCloskey files against me, that that group of Jewish friends is going to expand by leaps and bounds.

Konnyu acknowledges, however, that "on

items of social policy I'm not too popular among the more liberal elements of the Jewish community. So there would be a conflict there."

Perhaps most damaging to Konnyu, who prides himself on being a conservative family man, are the reports of a pattern of sexist comments. Konnyu calls a recent *Mercury News* piece about his behavior toward female employees "a juicy story that was based on half-truths and rumors that were unconfirmed." Yet he refuses to categorically deny the allegations. "If I talk about all the things that are in that story, that in turn allows you to repeat that whole set of misleading and half-truths, so it gets out in the press once again.

"If I was not running for reelection, I would deal with this story entirely differently. But I cannot afford the constant repetition of these half-truths and misleading statements to constantly be repeated in front of the voters, because it's very, very damaging.

"Some people believe the media and others don't. I can't go on explaining this stuff forever because it's just disastrous. Let's go on to the next topic," he says.

Konnyu's unconvincing response to the sexism charge combined with his penchant for making an ass out of himself has clearly rendered him vulnerable. A McCloskey challenge, however, would provide an unacceptable alternative to an undetermined number of voters in the district he would represent.

Big name Democrats like Assemblymember Byron Sher or Supervisor Dianne McKenna are staying on the sidelines—for now anyway. (*Palo Alto Weekly* publisher Bill Johnson, incorrectly identified in news reports as a Republican after being named by McCloskey as a potential candidate, says he has no desire to enter the race.) A number of lesser-known Democrats, among them Esalen Institute's Jim Garrison and Saratoga attorney and NOW activist Robin Yeamans, have entered the race, working under the assumption that a Republican primary would leave a damaged nominee vulnerable to a Democratic opponent, even in the historically "safe" Republican district.

Garrison, for one, doesn't fear a McCloskey candidacy. "I'd love to run against McCloskey," he says.

"I don't think he'll win on the Republican side. But if he does, I think that I could beat him because, number one, of the very strong support of Israel in this district and, number two, when people have a choice about the issues—in terms of the environment and in terms of foreign affairs and education—the positions I represent are much closer to the voters of this district.

"The problem on the Democratic side, historically, has been not that the voters don't agree with us but, quite simply, that we haven't had the money to let the voters know what the choices were. And that's how somebody like Ernie Konnyu, who is extremely right wing, got elected in a district which is very cosmopolitan," Garrison says.

Unfortunately for Garrison, issues haven't yet become a factor in how the 12th District picks its representatives.